

1980s oil bust sparks career in biotechnology for local lawyer

A promising career as a securities lawyer awaited Doug Branch when he graduated from the University of Oklahoma College of Law in 1982. Oklahoma was the heart of a booming energy economy with lots of oil and gas firms that needed legal work as they raised capital and dealt with regulators.

A couple of months later, Penn Square Bank went belly up.

The Penn Square collapse set off a domino effect of bank failures that coincided with declining energy prices and ultimately cost the jobs of thousands of Oklahomans. By 1988, the law firm that Branch worked for was suffering along with the rest of the state.

"Our business was in the tank," Branch said recently at the OU Research Park. "The law business in Oklahoma City was terrible, and I knew I had to change my practice."

Fast-forward almost 30 years. Branch recently was named CEO of an up-and-coming biotechnology startup called Biolytx Pharmaceuticals Corp.

So how did a securities attorney who focuses on the energy industry make the transition to CEO of a life science company?

The evolution began in those dark days of the late 1980s. Branch committed himself to learning all he could about licensing and managing intellectual property, and representing technology companies.

By 1988, the state Leg-



Jim Stafford

BIO MATTERS

islature had created the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST).

"I became familiar with OCAST," he said. "My first technology project was working with a professor at OU in the engineering school who was developing superconducting thin films."

That year, Branch also began representing Sonic Corp., a relationship that continues in 2016 with Phillips Murrah, the Oklahoma City law firm where Branch was a partner until this year.

"I was so fortunate because if that engagement didn't happen, I would probably have been fired," he said. "And it sustained me for the time that it took to develop my technology practice. Cliff Hudson, the CEO of Sonic, was general counsel then, and he and I are still great friends."

Immersion in biotech

Branch so completely immersed himself in technology that he joined the OCAST board in the early 1990s as its chairman. During his time on the board, the agency launched an ambitious plan to diversify the Oklahoma economy.

Centers of Excellence in manufacturing, molecular medicine, and laser tech-



Doug Branch

nology were developed at OU and Oklahoma State University. The Oklahoma Manufacturing Alliance was created. Funding programs took off.

"OCAST invested big in those Centers of Excellence," Branch said. "They were great investments, especially for the Oklahoma Health Center. It was a huge deal for biotechnology here."

Branch's involvement in biotechnology also began to expand. His clients have included high-profile startups such as Zymetx, Riley Genomics, Novazyme, Altheus Therapeutics and Cytovance Biologics, among others.

The construction and growth of the Presbyterian Health Foundation Research Park — now the OU Research Park — also added to the momentum, both for the biotech industry and for Branch.

"I opened up my office there in 2004 and it was called Biotech Law Associates," he said. "I went to the annual BIO (Biotechnology Industry Organization) show as a member. In fact, I went to the first BIO show at the Research Triangle Park as OCAST

chairman probably in '92 or '93."

Now company's CEO

Through an association with William Hagstrom of Alpha Bio Partners, Branch became acquainted with OU professor Anne Pereira, Ph.D. Pereira had co-founded Biolytx Pharmaceuticals with Hagstrom based on her groundbreaking work in developing peptides that kill antibiotic-resistant bacteria. That relationship eventually led him to his current position as CEO of the company.

"Our objectives are to develop our pipeline of peptides to the point where we can enter into collaborations with pharma companies to get through clinical trials," Branch said. "That's going to take time and a lot of money. It's a great challenge, but it's fascinating and exciting."

As Branch looked back over the past three decades, he says he would never have predicted the rise of biotech here or his participation in the industry.

"This was inconceivable when I graduated from law school," he said. "I mean, this industry didn't even exist then. The notion that I would be involved in biotech, I couldn't imagine ever doing anything like this. But I'm having the time of my life."

Jim Stafford writes about Oklahoma innovation and research and development topics on behalf of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science & Technology.

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